Note by LMB: I did this e-mail interview in November of 2009. Bonnie Norman posted it in her blog *A Working Title* in two parts, the first at http://awthome.wordpress.com/2010/02/08/an-interview-with-author-lois-mcmaster-bujold/

Interview by Bonnie Norman, Nov. 2009

Lois McMaster Bujold Interview Questions

Q1: What draws you to speculative fiction?

LMB: I've been reading the stuff since I was nine years old, and found the magazines and books my engineering professor father left lying around–he used to buy SF to read on the plane during consulting trips. I of course read the children's versions found in my school library, when I ran out of horse stories–I find I'm by no means the only SF writer of my generation with fond memories of Eleanor Cameron's *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*–but my dad's discards were the first fiction aimed at adults that I'd read.

What drew me was the adventure and the humor I occasionally found. One of the earliest hits for me was Eric Frank Russell's *Men, Martians, and Machines*, which had it all, and L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter* on the fantasy side. (Which actually inspired me at age fifteen to read Spenser's entire epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, although probably not in the mode Spenser'd had in mind. But no writer can imagine all their readers.) William Tenn and Robert Sheckley, I dimly recall, also had occasional humorous short stories. James Schmitz's *The Witches of Karres*–I own a Chilton first printing, bought new. I first encountered Bradbury about then, too. I don't note him for humor, but he did have some upbeat tales like "A Medicine for Melancholy" that kept me coming back. When I had a subscription to *Analog Magazine* back in the '60s, I would always open it up and read the stories illustrated by Kelly Freas first, in the hopes that they would be funny. Randall Garrett was always a good bet. Adventure was offered by too many writers to name, but then as now, smart humor was thin on the ground

My current favorite fantasy writer is Terry Pratchett, so my hunger for humor seems not to have shifted much over the decades.

Q2: What was the first piece you ever had published?

LMB: My first professional sale was a short story, "Barter," which appeared in the now-long-defunct *Twilight Zone Magazine* in 1985.

Curiously enough, it was a little comedy.

Q3: What did it feel like?

LMB: Like being lifted by a rescue helicopter. I'd been circulating a few short stories while working on my first novels, and had collected several rejection slips, experiencing the agonizing waits for same. About four months after I'd sent the tale in and had despaired of it, the acceptance appeared as a little blue *Twilight Zone* letterhead post card, with a typed message from editor T.E.D. Klein on the back, fallen down to the bottom of my front porch post box. I still have the card, somewhere. (A quick look in my filing cabinet just unearthed the original contract, which was for $250 and dated September 1984; the story was published in the spring of 1985.)

I was wildly excited, and ran upstairs to show it to my then-husband, who was perhaps less excited to be woken up. (He, and I, did a lot of shift work back in the day.) Validation from actual grown-ups! In New York City! The boost to my morale was enough to keep me writing through the end of *The Warrior's Apprentice* and all of *Ethan of Athos,* at which point my second professional sale was three completed novels to Baen Books.

Now, *that* was a day–mid-October, 1985. That news came as a phone call from Jim, about whom I knew absolutely nothing at the time; my reaction was a weird amalgam of total elation (and relief) undercut by newbie-writer paranoia. I eventually learned enough to get over the paranoia, but it took some time.

Q4: What was the defining moment that made you say "Yes, I'm a writer"?

LMB: I'm not sure there was one defining moment; more a succession of steps. Finishing the early short stories, finishing the first novel, finishing *something* in my life for a change. (I had many false starts.) Encouragement from friends. The professional sales were what first allowed me to say "I'm a writer" out loud in front of people, though. At that point, I had proof, not just a dodgy and time-consuming hobby.

Q5: How long have you been writing? What keeps you writing?

LMB: The two short answers, in order, are: Since third grade, and need for income.

To expand a little, I really started trying to write in junior high school, and kept trying through early college. (The results were fragmentary.) I was then distracted for a decade by marriage, work, and eventually children, and did not come back to those aspirations till my early 30s. At that point, it was time to railroad, as the old turn of phrase has it.

Once my career was finally up and running, it provided a lot of positive reinforcement: income, an adult identity, much-longed-for personal validation, and human attention. SF is both a career and a community.

This line of work also meshes well with both my control-freak and my reclusive proclivities. I am not entirely sure that writing (and reading) fiction isn't actually a dissociative disorder, which suggests that I will keep on regardless of need for income, or till someone comes up with the right meds.

Q7: What's your favorite speculative fiction work?

LMB: I'm not sure I have a single favorite, but certainly *The Lord of the Rings* is the work to which I've returned most persistently, since I first read it in 1965. The text is the same, but I keep changing, so the reading of it keeps changing. Remarkably durable, that book.

I've occasionally thought that if I ever end up taking one of those one-way trips to a hospice, that would be the book I'd want to take along. For one thing, it would be all right if I didn't get a chance to finish…

Q8: There are thirteen books and at least five short stories within the Miles Vorkosigan universe. How many more books and/or short stories do you think you'll write for the series?

LMB: I have no idea. The series structure is open-ended, so there is no final grand climax at which I have ever been aiming. But after a several-book break from the series, I have just completed a new Miles novel for publisher Toni Weisskopf at Baen. (I've been working with Toni for almost as long as with the late Jim Baen.) I finished final revisions this past July.

Title is *CryoBurn*, projected publication date is November 2010, which makes right now a little early to start promoting. It's an adventure with Miles in mystery-mode, an Imperial Auditor investigation on a planet called Kibou-daini, a new setting, which I hope will help keep readers from totally second-guessing the plot before the book's even printed. Miles is now 39. The tale is multi-viewpoint, featuring Miles, Armsman Roic, and a local lad named Jin

Sato. As usual, what Miles starts out to do and what he ends up doing are only tenuously related.

Q9: Which of the Vorkosigan books or short stories is your personal favorite and why?

LMB: Hm, hard question. *Memory*, I suppose, because it's where my on-going central theme of personal identity and how it breaks and grows and changes gets the hardest workout. And it's all about second chances, which grow increasingly important as one grows older, if only because one has long ago used up all one's first chances.

And *A Civil Campaign*, because it's ornery and a comedy.

Q10 & 11: Because of his body, Miles must rely on brain over brawn, making him almost an anti-hero. What was the inspiration for such a strange main character? Is Miles Vorkosigan based off of anyone in real life?

LMB: Not whole. Like most characters, he's an amalgam who is forged by the events of his books into an alloy, and becomes himself through his actions (and he's exceptionally active.)

He actually began as a thing to do to Aral and Cordelia–I first envisioned him back when I was still writing *Shards of Honor*. I knew their first son and heir would be born damaged, and be smart, short, and difficult. I knew that before I knew his name, or that he would be an only child. With that for a magnetic core, he began to attract other elements. Direct inspirations include T.E. Lawrence, another ambitious soldier who was brilliant, squirrelly, and short, and a physical template from a hospital pharmacist I used to work with back in my 20s, from whom I stole the height, physique, chin tic and leg braces. Miles's "Great Man's Son" syndrome comes from my relationship with my own father, who was a professor of engineering of international repute.

Side note: What *is* the precise definition of the term "anti-hero," anyway? My old dictionary doesn't help. But I don't think Miles is one.

Q12: Although Dag Bluefield from *The Sharing Knife* series and Miles Vorkosigan are very different on the surface, they're both men changed by physical limitations. What drives you to write heroes like them?

LMB: I don't know. That's just how they walk onto the stage of my brain.

A character without a problem is a character without a story. Also, if one is going to give a character a number of extraordinary abilities, and F&SF readers definitely have a preference for that, they need some balance, or they would be insufferable. Miles frequently manages insufferable anyway, but that's Miles.

Q13: When did you first start to create the magical system for the Lakewalkers and was there any particular inspiration for it?

LMB: *TSK* started with Dag and Fawn, a core tale of a weary soldier and a naïve young girl from conflicting cultures that could have taken place in many different settings (and doubtless has). I then built their world outward from them–exactly the way I started the Vorkosiverse around Aral and Cordelia, so I knew how the process worked for me.

The notion of the distributed Dark Lords, the malices, came next. I was reflecting on the sad lack of Dark Lords in my tales heretofore, and their narrative limits–kill one off at the big climax of your volume, and for ensuing tales you just have to invent another or revive the first. I then attended Balticon at the time of the seventeen-year cicada outbreak–big gaudy bewildered insects raining down out of the sky like sleet. Why not Dark Lords with their revival built-in, like cicadas? That would sure save steps. Malices are also a symbolic representation of every egomaniacal man-on-horseback who arrives on a wave of chaos, dispute, and war in our own world, with the depressing regularity of bus schedules. The recurrence of malices turns fighting evil from a glorious (and illusory) War to End Wars, with medals handed out at the end, into a sort of on-going housework.

The notion of the sharing knives came next, and I do not know from where, aside from the plethora of magic weaponry in the genre, except that they do work as a symbol of the sacrifice demanded of any community's protectors.

With the malices and the sharing knives established as core elements, the structure of the Lakewalker culture, profoundly shaped by them, grew by deduction and accretion.

Q14: Fawn starts out as a naïve farmer girl, but eventually becomes an equal partner with Dag. Do you see Fawn as a kind of role model for young girls growing up, and if so, what's her best trait?

LMB: I don't write role models. I write characters. Fawn of course has a lot of important positive qualities: curiosity, determination, energy, no fear of hard work. But those would be good for any human at any time in their life. I do think the way she overcomes her earlier serious mistakes, coming to grips with them and learning and moving on,

instead of letting them crush her in place, is one of her most important traits, though.

Q15: Will there be any more books in the Sharing Knife series? If so, do you have any schedule in mind of when?

LMB: I don't know. That world is full of possibilities to explore, not only going forward in time and outward in geography, but jumping backward to the old high magical culture of the Lake League (although that would feel odd, knowing its doom.) But I don't have anything cooking at present.

Q16 & 17: Do you think that being a woman author has made getting published harder or easier for you? Do you see yourself as a pioneer for women authors, considering your success in both fantasy and science fiction? Do you think the fact that you've gone before and been so successful has helped other women break into the two genres?

LMB: I've had my fair share of problems from being a woman, and my share from being a writer, but I can't say that I've had any special problems from being a woman writer. In terms of the F&SF genre, and breaking in during the mid-1980s, enough women genre writers had been there before me that I never felt I was beating a trail, more like making my way down a well-groomed path that had already been paved for me. Without harking back to Mary Shelley (of whom I was barely conscious as a young reader), I had prior role models in Andre Norton, Zenna Henderson, and Anne McCaffrey, just to name a few; going on, Ursula LeGuin and C.J. Cherryh. (LeGuin, of course, was writing in McCaffrey's generation, but I didn't discover her works till later.) Not to mention my own immediate friends who mentored me.

Getting published is hard regardless of one's gender.

I'm certainly no pioneer, but if any success of mine widens the path for others, excellent. Publishers are always looking for more of what sells. Which is why I'd rank McCaffrey as the most important writer of her generation to the women writers who followed, despite her getting less academic attention.

Once, very early in my career, Jim Baen introduced me, more hopefully than truthfully, as "the new Gordy Dickson." About which I had several thoughts, two of which were: But surely the old Gordy Dickson isn't done, and, So, who gets to be the new Lois McMaster Bujold? As it transpired, the new LMB was Elizabeth Moon, and the new Elizabeth Moon was Margaret Ball. So these cascades do happen.

This same conversation about women F&SF writers has been going on since I broke in a quarter-century ago, by the way. In the movie *Alice in Wonderland*, there is a brief appearance by a dog-like creature with whisk brooms for whiskers, who walks backward, erasing its footsteps as it goes. Every time this subject comes up, I think of that creature.

Q18: Where do you think the future of speculative fiction is going? More inclusive of diverse authors and characters, or more exclusive?

LMB: More inclusive, to be sure. SF has always been a mirror of its times, though not only that.

*Market share* is a whole 'nother, and more dubious, subject. I do wonder about all the potential young readers who are now going off to spend their time playing *World of Warcraft*, or other entertainments that would have been science fiction itself a generation ago, instead of reading. 24/7 is a hard limit for human attention, and we live in an entertainment glut. The current structure of publishing favors mass markets, and all mass markets have a tendency to push their products toward a bland mean. (See Hollywood movies.) Quirky and diverse works have always had an uphill struggle, because there's less money in niche markets. Will all reading become niche?

Although I do have to note, "OMG the genre is dying, no one is reading any more!" is *another* conversation that has been going on largely unchanged since I came in. That seems awfully long for a death-bed scene.

Q19: Do you prefer writing one genre over another? Is one easier for you?

LMB: The mechanics of writing are exactly the same for me in either fantasy or science fiction. Both are equally hard, I suppose. Occupying different characters' heads is as much of a switch for me as occupying different worlds, really.

Q20: What are you working on right now?

LMB: Right now (November 2009), I'm on a long-awaited break. "Refilling the well" or "goofing off," you decide. I am also partway through a total and radical re-do of my home office, something I haven't done since I moved into this house fourteen years back. It's a little scary. But at least it has forced me to clean.

Q21: Finally, do you have anything else you'd like to add? (Advice, Questions, Comments)

LMB: That's probably enough for one day.

For far more than anyone would ever want to know about me, I have interview and essay collections up on my fan-run website at www.dendarii.com Or, if you're tired of reading on-line, much of that material and more has been collected in *The Vorkosigan Companion*, edited by my old friend and colleague Lillian Stewart Carl and John Helfers. It stints the recent fantasy, but collects a lot of that early-writer experience.